DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 346 UD 032 559

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TITLE	What Washington Ought To Be Reading.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Book/Product Reviews (072)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; Community Involvement; Educational Change; Educational Improvement; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Hispanic Americans; Partnerships in Education; *Policy Formation; Public Policy; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	California; *Hispanic American Students; Reform Efforts; Texas

ABSTRACT

Two recent reports on education that should be read by policy makers are reviewed with a focus in the achievement of Hispanic American students. The first is "Quality Counts: A Report Card on the Condition of Public Education in the Fifty States", published in "Education Week." The second is "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future." Research findings in "Quality Counts" indicate that Hispanic students in Texas outperform their counterparts in California by a two-to-one margin on national reading and mathematics examinations. One key fact explains much of this disparity: 90% of Texas elementary school teachers had fewer than 25 students, while only 7% of California teachers were so fortunate. The National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for most of the states are listed in "Quality Counts." Clear evidence is found of dissimilar educational outcomes among Hispanics based on region. "What Matters Most" complements "Quality Counts" by focusing on teachers. Of special interest are the "blue pages" and the "blue print." The blue pages include narratives about actual reforms that are being tested. One examples an elementary school in Austin (Texas) with a predominantly Hispanic American student body. Community involvement and partnerships among parents, community, and the school are leading to dramatically improved attendance and achievement. The blue print that accompanies the text contains inspiring quotations about the importance of teachers. (SLD)

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WHAT WASHINGTON OUGHT TO BE READING

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Those of us who live in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area become wary of politicians whose rhetoric belies reality. How often do we hear leaders on Capitol Hill make promises about American education. They promise that we'll be first in math and science achievement; that we'll graduate 90% of our seniors; and that all children will enter school ready to learn. Idealism may be inspiring but it is quickly deflated by reality--by the reality that educational inequities are normal in America.

Did you know, for example, that scores for Hispanic fourth-graders in reading and eighth-graders in math are twice as high in Texas compared to California? Did you know that only 54% of secondary science and math teachers in predominantly nonwhite schools are certified in their field? In majority white schools (90-100% white), 86% of the high school science and math teachers are certified. Among the fifty states, how different are the reading scores of fourth grade Hispanic children?

To find out the answers to these and many other important questions about Hispanic students in America, being by reading "Quality Counts," a "Report Card on the Condition of Public Education in the Fifty States," published by *Education Week*.

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"Quality Counts" looks at five indicators of educational progress. Its balanced portrayal of the nation and the states can help leaders and legislators ensure educational equity. Where "Quality Counts" is extensive and encyclopedic, another key policy report, "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future" (What Matters Most), focuses intensively on the teaching profession and teacher education. "What Matters Most" highlights the crucial importance of teacher competency in contemporary education reform. Together, both have much to teach the Washington insider and the concerned citizen.

Though I live near Washington, I like to think of myself more as a "concerned citizen" worried about the quality of education in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. In our decentralized system of education, we must always look beyond the nation's capital to see how our children are performing.

Lets focus on Hispanic students. According to research findings in "Quality Counts," Hispanic students in Texas outperform their counterparts in California by a two to one margin on national reading and math exams. In the 1994 "National Assessment of Education Progress" (NAEP), 41% of Hispanic fourth-graders in Texas were reading at "basic or above"; for California, only 22% scored at that level. Eighth-grade math achievement paints a similar picture: 44% of Hispanic students in Texas scored at "basic or above"; in California, 27% achieved a similar ranking. Why the disparities? A key fact explains much: 90% of Texas elementary school teachers had fewer than 25 students whereas only 7% of California's teachers were so fortunate. Might there be a correlation between student achievement and class size?

In "Quality Counts," practically all fifty states list 1994 NAEP reading scores for fourth-grade students. Here again, one finds clear evidence--an abundance of facts--revealing dissimilar educational outcomes among Hispanics based on region. The percentage of Hispanic students scoring "at or above" proficient in particular states defies geographic generalization: 4% in Alabama; 25% in Maine; 12% in Maryland; 21% in

Minneosta; 14% in Wisconsin; 6% in California. When it comes to the academic achievement of Hispanics, being American is less important than being a resident of a particular state.

"Quality Counts" also provides journalistic snapshots of current reforms. One article entitled "Compact for Change" highlights the efforts of the Pueblo, Colorado community. To boost the achievement of its 51% Hispanic student body, the Pueblo community, including "local businesses, public schools, and postsecondary institutions," implemented standards for students to meet and for teachers to teach. Each teacher had educational goals spelled out in an "Academic Content Standards," which specified benchmarks for grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12. Like any reform measure, resistance--often from teachers--forced Pueblo to take a wait and see attitude. One educational leader urges patience: "I'm not going to sit here and tell you that our ACT scores are higher than they were four years ago, but we would hope to able to say that in five years."

As journalism, "Quality Counts" abounds with lively, descriptive exposition. Graphs--bar, line, pie--and reports--from journalists, from scholars, and from policymakers--paint an honest portrait of American education. For Hispanic educators, knowledge of educational inequities among our children is a prerequisite for finding solutions. Indeed, "Quality Counts" whet my appetite for more information on potential solutions.

"What Matters Most" complements "Quality Counts," shifting the focus exclusively and intensively on teachers. "What Matters Most" is prescriptive, didactic, and useful. It may also become the "Nation of Risk" of the 1990s since it is being widely quoted by many writers. Pay especially close attention to the "blue pages" and the "blue print."

The "blue pages" include narratives on actual reforms that are currently being tried and tested by practitioners. For example, Zavala Elementary school in Austin, Texas was failing badly until its new principal, Alejandro Mindiz-Melton, involved the entire

community to assist his predominantly Hispanic, student body. At community meetings, Mindiz-Melton began "cultivating relationships with parents and community leaders, including Austin Interfaith, a coalition of religious organizations." Parents and teachers worked more closely as partners. These partnerships and widespread community support inspired teachers to find new and better ways of meeting the educational needs of their children.

Teacher centered reform and hard work revolutionized Zavala Elementary School. Before the changes, Zavala was a sick school: teacher turnover was around 50%; attendance at PTA meetings was pitifully low; and student scores on state reading, writing, and math tests placed the school 63rd among 64 Austin elementary schools. Today, student scores on the same tests are above average compared to the state and city norm; "teacher attrition has all but stopped;" and in 1994-1995 school year, student attendance averaged 94.4%, the highest in the city.

The "blue-print" alongside the main text includes inspiring quotes about the importance of teachers. One quote by a teacher was especially noteworthy. "But how do I feel at the end of each day," asks Irasema Ortega-Crawford. "I feel proud of my students. I feel more knowledgeable about living, teaching, and learning. I feel lucky to be a teacher."

"What matters most?" Teachers! Where must we insure quality? In student achievement, especially among Hispanic students; and we must insure quality in all fifty states including the District of Columbia which is conspicuously absent from "Quality Counts." Both "What Matters Most" and "Quality Counts" ask important questions and then answers them well. The prescriptions, I think, will resonate not only in Texas, California, Florida, and other American states, but also inside Washington where policymakers ought to listen to the recommendations.

In this President Clinton has been consistent. Recall that in his 1997 State of the Union Address, he proposed ten principles for his "national crusade for standards in

American education." His first proposal was to test all American fourth-graders in reading and eighth-graders in math by the year1999. He is still trying to have national tests established.

Might the president have looked at "Quality Counts" and seen the achievement disparities between states and between ethnic groups? Perhaps he then concluded that national excellence in education will depend on more equitable educational outcomes in all fifty states and among all students; hence the national testing. Second, he added that in order "to have the best schools, we must have the best teachers." Sounds familiar? I wonder if he read "What Matters Most," and was impressed by its focus on teacher training and teacher competency.

If "Quality Counts" describes the reality in American education, especially the reality of academic underachievement among Hispanics, and if "What Matters Most" is a plan, especially one involving teachers, then all of us here in Washington ought to read these two important reports. What could be more important than learning about our children's educational plight? The Hispanic community might want to begin its own "national crusade" that insures equal opportunity and excellence for all Hispanic students regardless of the fortunes of one's birth be it place of residence, family income, or ethnicity. After all, *quality counts* not only in particular states but in the entire nation. Towards this end, helping teachers raise the academic achievement of all our children is *what matters most*.

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